







The national park and  
its surroundings shine in  
autumn's warm glow

# A YELLOWSTONE ROAD TRIP

BY LESLIE FORSBERG

F

OUR CARS SEEMS LIKE A TRAFFIC JAM in Bozeman, Mont., in late September. If you do have to wait at a traffic light, the butterscotch leaves of aspen trees against a boundless blue sky offer art to rival any in galleries. If you want to see a crowd, head down the highway to the Corral Bar & Steakhouse, where locals and amused tourists pile in for bison rib eye and huckleberry pie in an Old West setting complete with taxidermy.

And so it goes in autumn in the Treasure State. My husband, Eric, and I are here for a fall getaway to America's parks heartland, the Yellowstone region, and we'll roll through some of Montana's most charming towns, en route.

Upon arriving in Bozeman, we head straight for the renowned Museum of the Rockies, which boasts one of the world's largest collections of dinosaur fossils. We share the museum's famous halls with barely a dozen other visitors as we roam among displays of some of the Earth's largest carnivores, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, their skeletons dwarfing us. I'm not usually much swayed by fossils, but I'm fascinated to learn that fossils found right here in Big Sky Country, unearthed by master paleontologist Jack Horner, helped change science. Horner's





Bison have room to roam in Yellowstone's Hayden Valley.

1978 discovery of 14 dinosaur nests formed the cornerstone for the widely accepted theory that dinosaurs built nesting colonies to protect their young.

Outside the museum, a two-story log house surrounded by a heritage vegetable garden—part of a living history farm—reminds visitors of the ranchers who settled on the vast grasslands of this region. Beans are bubbling on the wood stove inside, and volunteers are filling porcelain pitchers with wildflowers as they set an outdoor table for a special-occasion dinner; the scene is straight out of a sepia-toned movie.

**T**

WENTY-SIX MILES east of Bozeman on I-90, we drive through the picturesque redbrick Western town of Livingston, on the banks of the Yellowstone River and surrounded by towering mountains. Timeworn shops here filled with Western goods sit next to galleries and eateries. At Mountain West Mercantile, the yodeling cowboy soundtrack suits the wares—vintage stenciled crockery, enamel dinnerware and sequined square-dance skirts. Antique tchotchkes for tourists, I figure. Then the door swings open and

a leather-faced rancher with a handlebar mustache and cowboy hat steps inside to shop for carved antler-handled knives.

Midday, we pause for lunch surrounded by gardens at Café Regis, in Red Lodge, before pulling onto one of the most scenic drives in the nation, the Beartooth Highway. This 68-mile All-American Road reaches dizzying heights, topping out at 10,947 feet, as it traverses the backbone of the Northern Rockies, surrounded by the jagged Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains.

From steep, rocky alpine slopes, we descend through forest to the hamlet of Cooke City, and roll through the Northeast Entrance of Yellowstone National Park. Just beyond is the vast, open Lamar Valley, where rolling hills are tufted with sagebrush.

Around a bend, Eric taps on the brakes as we slow, and then stop behind a compact red car. Our first stop-and-go traffic of the trip. But this isn't caused by too many cars. We're surrounded on three sides by burly bison the size of an SUV, which have decided that, cars or not, it's time to cross the road. We gape in astonishment as we count the herd: About 50. Finally, the last of the shaggy ungulates plods across, and we break free. "Well, that's a once-in-a-lifetime experience," I laugh, as we motor forward.

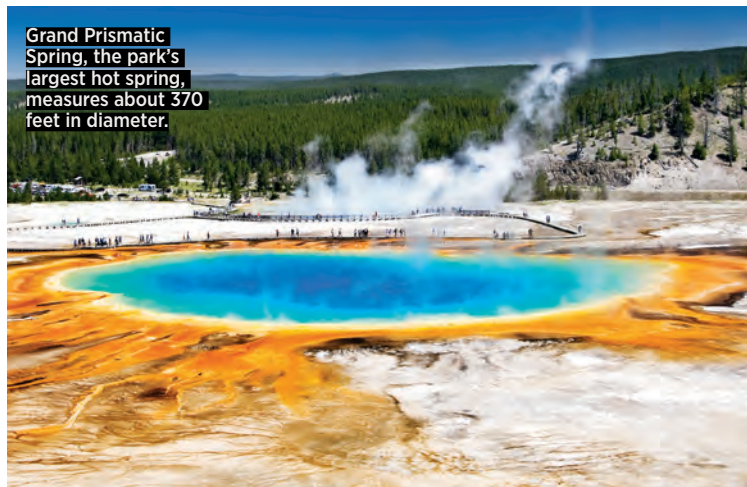




Sunset adds to Old Faithful's appeal.



The historic Old Faithful Inn is open from early May through mid-October.



Grand Prismatic Spring, the park's largest hot spring, measures about 370 feet in diameter.

**I**SPOKE TOO QUICKLY. Roughly 100 bison mingle with cars in the road around the next bend, slowly trapping us yet again. Freed again, in less than 5 minutes we're once more surrounded by bison—astoundingly, more than 150 this time—as they plummet down a steep adjacent hillside. They call to one another in a deep, primitive sound, a cross between a cow lowing and a lion roaring. A massive old bull with menacing horns, glistening eyes and lichen in the tangled mass of fur atop his burly head trots by just feet from us.

Finally, a tow truck at the rear of our column pulls into the opposite lane and, lights flashing, edges slowly toward the obstinate beasts as if to say, “Move along, now; the show’s over.” It breaks the impasse, and the bison trudge slowly off the road.

Although we may have spent a few moments at a slow crawl, we're delighted to find the park is less crowded, the weather warm, but not hot, the sagebrush sea ripe with sun-warmed scent, and red-gold aspens fringing the valleys. As we pass, yellow platters of rabbitbrush flowers wave in our wake.

At Mammoth Hot Springs, an hour and a half west of the entry station, the air bears the heavy scent of sulfur, and steaming mineral water spills over chalky limestone

terraces, resembling a many-layered wedding cake. Well-fed elk are strolling about on the lawn outside the 1936 Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel as though they own the place, which, historically, they do. Signs say to stay well clear of them—a challenge, since they slouch around corners of buildings and command the parking lot like the clichéd bad boys of high school.

The next day we drive an hour and a half southeast on the Grand Loop Road, and then walk to a scenic overlook of the massive, 308-foot Lower Yellowstone Falls. The scene is both preternaturally picturesque and oddly familiar: I've seen this iconic scene rendered in so many forms, I could swear I've been here before. A gaggle of giggling Japanese teens with selfie sticks lends a contemporary vibe to the classic scenery before us.

I'm eager to encounter our first geyser of the trip on Firehole Lake Drive. We're the only ones to park at a lonely viewing platform, surrounded by bison footprints in the mud. The geyser is silent and there's no one around, so I lie down on a bench to soak up the sun.

The silence doesn't last long. Bellowing, two young bison bulls emerge from a pine grove near the geyser and, heads lowered, bunt at each other. It's like two big trucks colliding as they huff and jostle. Mere seconds later, we hear a massive “whump” as, just beyond the bison, White



Lower Yellowstone Falls provides dramatic views near Canyon Village.

Dome Geyser goes off—and, unbelievably, a shimmering rainbow forms. Being the only ones here to witness this trifecta of nature sends shivers up my spine.

With fewer guests around in the fall, we score a geyser-view room in the historic Old Faithful Inn, on the southwest corner of the Grand Loop Road. This 1904 masterpiece of craftsmanship, built from surrounding lodgepole pines, is a natural wonder of its own, with peeled-log columns supported by twisted branches rising up and up in tiers of balconies, surrounding a massive central fireplace.

**O**LD FAITHFUL LIVES UP TO ITS NAME—it’s predictable. Looking out our window the next morning, we notice crowds gathering, which we take as a cue to make our way to the bleachers. Everyone stares at their watches, anticipatory chatter building. Then cheers erupt as a column of compressed steam spouts, water raining down with splatting sounds. It’s nice, but we’re ready for the spontaneity promised by an entire valley of geysers.

Readying our rental bikes in the parking lot, we’re startled by a sonorous “whoomph,” and turn around to see Beehive Geyser spouting sky high with super-charged steam. Clearly there’s no need to time our wanderings, with more than 150 geysers in the Upper Geyser Basin.

As we bike past Castle Geyser it, too, erupts, in a

tall, stately plume. As if on cue, 100 paces away, Grotto Geyser erupts—but its performance is almost comical, as it gurgles and burbles, spits and spouts in splats and squirts. Turning off the paved path, we cycle through sulfur-scented pinewoods where steam rises, wraith-like, from the ground. And at Biscuit Basin, we stroll along the boardwalk past paint pots resembling giant aqueous flowers, their turquoise waters rimmed with red and yellow algae.

From here, we head for the hills on the Mystic Falls Trail, switchbacking up a hot, dry hillside to a breeze-cooled overlook. Forests of young pines blanket the landscape, and seemingly everywhere we look there is a plume of steam rising to the sky. “Look—there goes Old Faithful,” Eric announces, as we settle down with our picnic lunch. A chipmunk skitters along a log toward me before stopping one foot away. Peering quizzically up, he seems to gauge the distance between himself and my sandwich, before deciding better and scampering off.

After lunch, we pick our way down the steep, sandy hillside, sounds of the waterfall growing closer with every switchback. Finally, there it is: a long, slender flash of a fall tumbling past trees with saffron-colored leaves. There’s no one else here, and it feels to us as much a discovery as it must have to those awestruck explorers who first trekked to Yellowstone 150 years ago.

To our surprise, wisps of steam are rising from crevices alongside Mystic Falls. Of course: fumaroles in a waterfall. Truly, only in Yellowstone. **1**